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TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC., IN OPPOSITION TO THE ELIMINATION OF FUNDING FOR THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE AND OPPOSING STATUTORY AMENDMENTS TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Connecticut Legal Services Inc. (CLS), a private nonprofit law firm providing free legal services to low-income clients in civil matters since 1977. Over the last 30 years, CLS has represented hundreds of thousands of low-income families in cases involving children's legal issues. These issue range from an individual child's medical, educational, and juvenile justice issues, to systemic advocacy with the Departments of Children and Families, Social Services, Developmental Services, and Mental Health and Addiction Services. Despite CLS' long history of children's advocacy, we often refer callers to OCA-- either because the callers are from social service agencies with concerns about a child, from families who no longer have custody of their children but who raise legitimate concerns about the welfare of their child, or worse, from families asking for an investigation regarding the death of their child who was in state care. This is the critical role filled by the Office of the Child Advocate--an independent agency which has represented children directly, has been a tireless voice of children's advocacy on legislative issues, and had conducted thorough child fatality reviews with detailed recommendations to address systemic failures.

During the past 8 and a half years in particular, under the leadership of Child Advocate Jeanne Milstein, the OCA has addressed the most significant issues facing Connecticut children today--ranging from fatality reviews and general investigations to the special health care needs of children, the educational failures suffered by children, child safety issues, and the problems children experience while receiving state services. In addition to reviewing the problems, the OCA takes seriously its charge to recommend viable solutions for those problems and has created specific plans to address its findings.

CLS has had the privilege of working with the OCA while representing children both directly and in systemic litigation. We have found that the OCA at all times places the interests of Connecticut's children above any political agenda. In doing the job the OCA was created to do, the agency has not bowed to political expediency but rather examined each issue before it with objectivity -- the exact purpose meant in the creation of the Office of the Child Advocate.

During this legislative session, the legislature will be asked to make difficult choices in the allocation of extremely scarce state funding. The interests of the state will best be served by the continuation of an independent Office of the Child Advocate. This agency is doing its job and doing it well- and in the long run, this is the best way to protect the scarce resources remaining in Connecticut--both fiscal and human.

Anne Louise Blanchard
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